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DOCTOR STRANGE®

MASTER OF THE MYSTIC ARTS

TM

WHEN TWILIGHT SWEEPS ACROSS NEW YORK CITY, CERTAIN STREETS ARE TAKEN OVER BY A VERY SPECIAL BREED OF PREDATORY ANIMAL. IT WALKS ON TWO LEGS--
--AND WILL DO ANYTHING... IF THE PRICE IS RIGHT!
YOU'LL PAY US HOW MUCH? HEY, WHO WE GOTTA KILL?
AS THE SUN GOES DOWN, THE TEMPERATURE DROPS...
...AND THE CITY'S WALKING WOUNDED HUDDLE TOGETHER FOR WARMTH. THEY ARE EASY PREY.
HEY THERE! HOW WOULD YOU PEOPLE LIKE TO MAKE FIFTY DOLLARS, APIECE!
I COULDN'A HEARED THAT RIGHT!
WITHIN AN HOUR OF DUSK, THE CITY IS AGLOW WITH AN ELECTRIC RADIANCE.
BUT HERE AND THERE AMID THE BRIGHT LIGHT, THERE ARE DARK SHADOWS... AND TONIGHT, DARKER MEN!
MY ORGANIZATION NEEDS MEN... LOTS OF MEN. MONEY IS NO OBJECT.
TO THOSE WITHOUT CARES, WITHOUT MORALS, WITHOUT HOPE... THE OFFER IS IRRESISTIBLE...
...ALMOST MAGICALLY SO!
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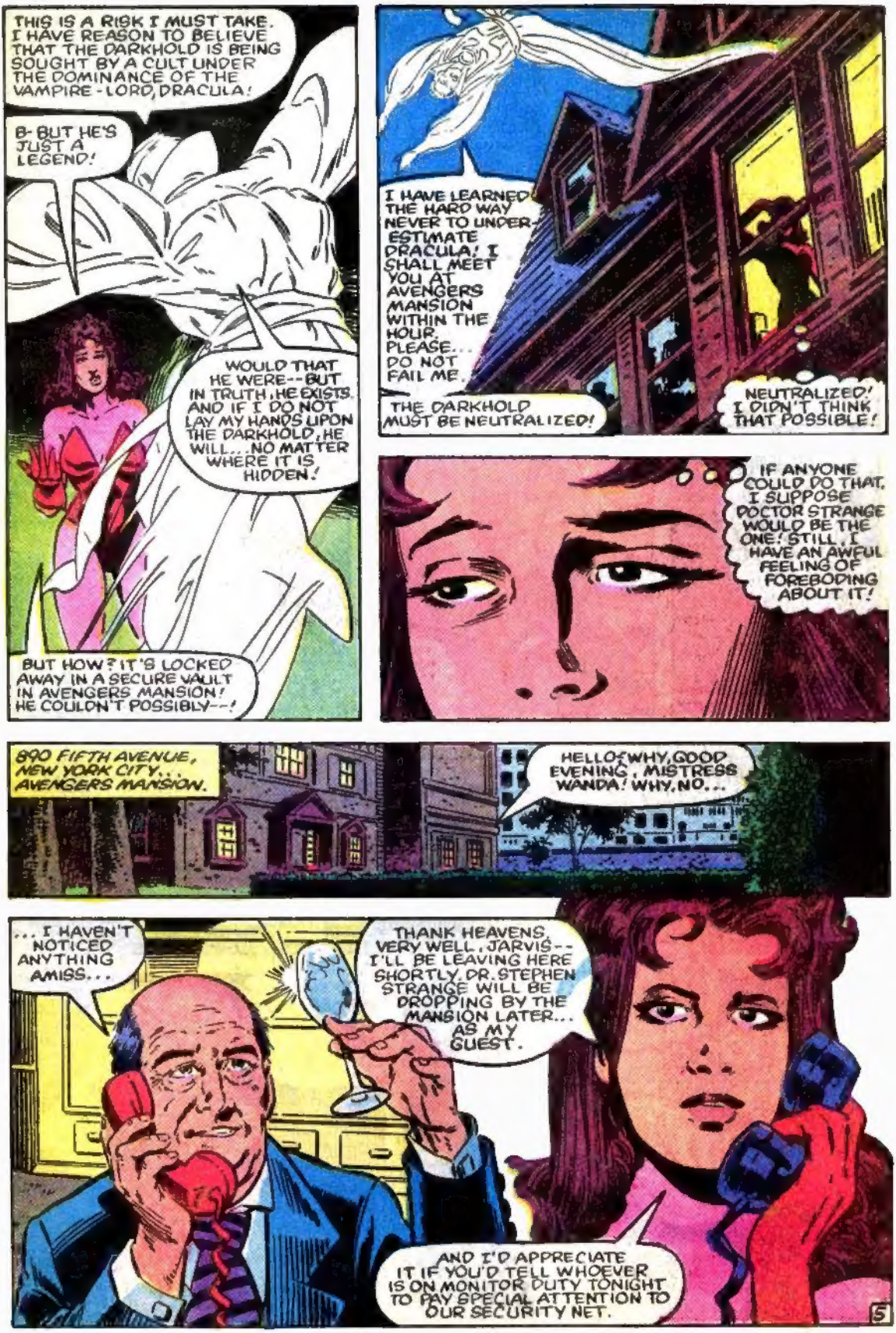
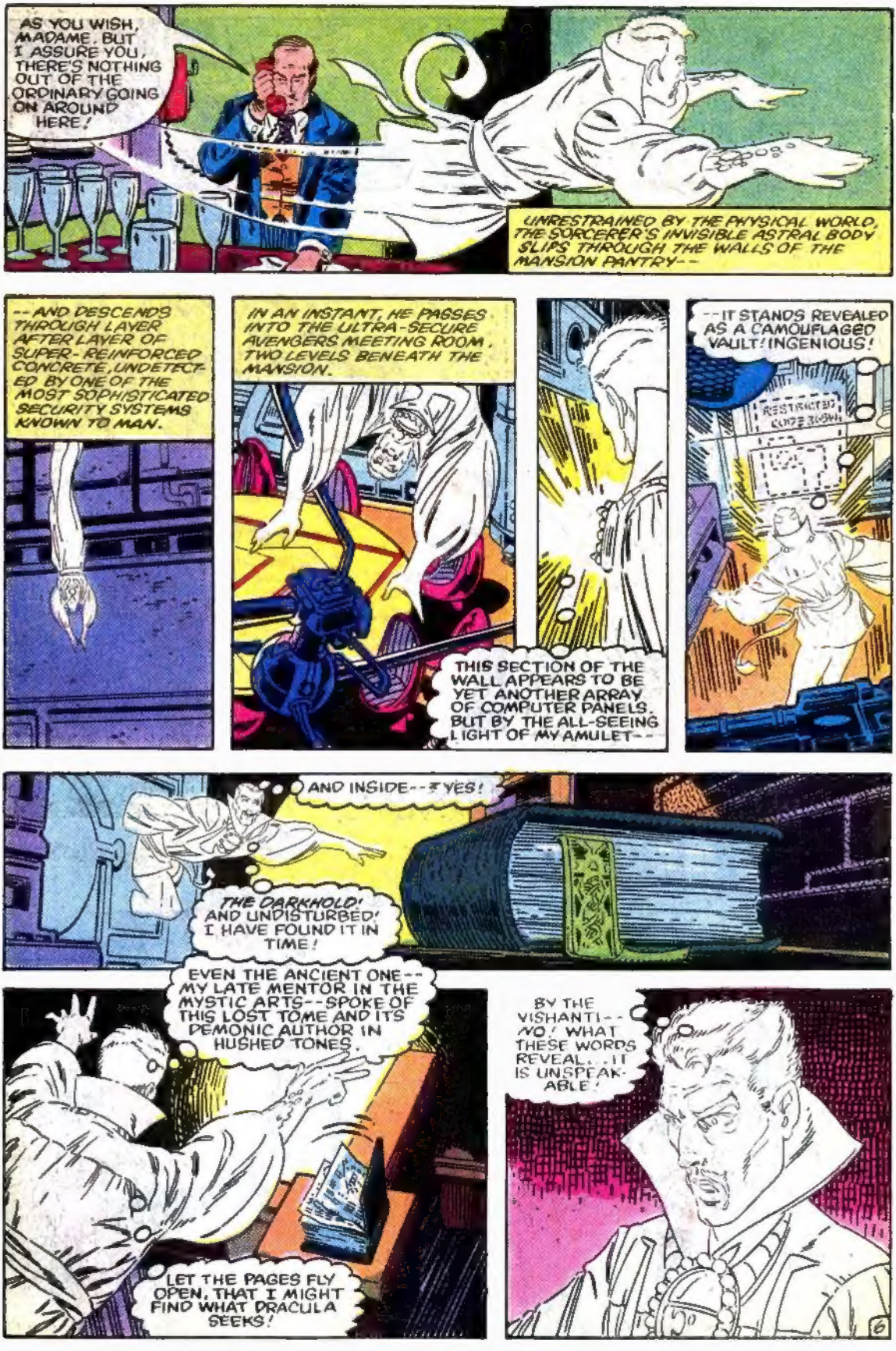
'EY, MAN, YOU WALKED US HALFWAY 'CROSS TOWN!
YEAH. WE DIDN'T 'SPECT NO NATURE HIKE! WHEN WE GETTIN' PAID?
SOON. YOU'LL GET WHAT'S COMING YOU... IN THERE!
YES. YOU WILL DO FINE!
WHAT THE--? LOOKS LIKE HALF THE GANGS IN TOWN ARE HERE! ¡PYEW!-AN' ALLA THE WINOS!
GEEZ, LOUIE, WHAT ARE THESE GUYS... MOONIES?
YO! RIDIN' HOOD! WHAT KINDA SCAM IS THIS?
ALL WILL BE CLEAR WHEN THE MASTER ARRIVES.
MASTER? THAT CUTS IT! YOU CAN PREACH ALL YA WANT TO THESE BLIMS, BUT I'M NOT BUYING!
YOU CANNOT LEAVE NOW!
LEGGO, YA CREEPS! YOU CAN'T--HEY!
BEHOLD--YOUR NEW MASTER!
HUH? BUT THAT'S A BAT.
THE NEW ARRIVALS FREEZE IN DISBELIEF, AS THE BAT SWELLS, GROWS--
--AND ASSUMES THE FORM OF A MAN!
THIS IS TO BE MY NEW ARMY, EH? WELL, I HAVE COMMANDED WORSE RABBLE, I SUPPOSE!
HEAR ME, VERMIN! YOU ARE MINE NOW!
NONE CAN RESIST THE POWER OF DRACULA!
2

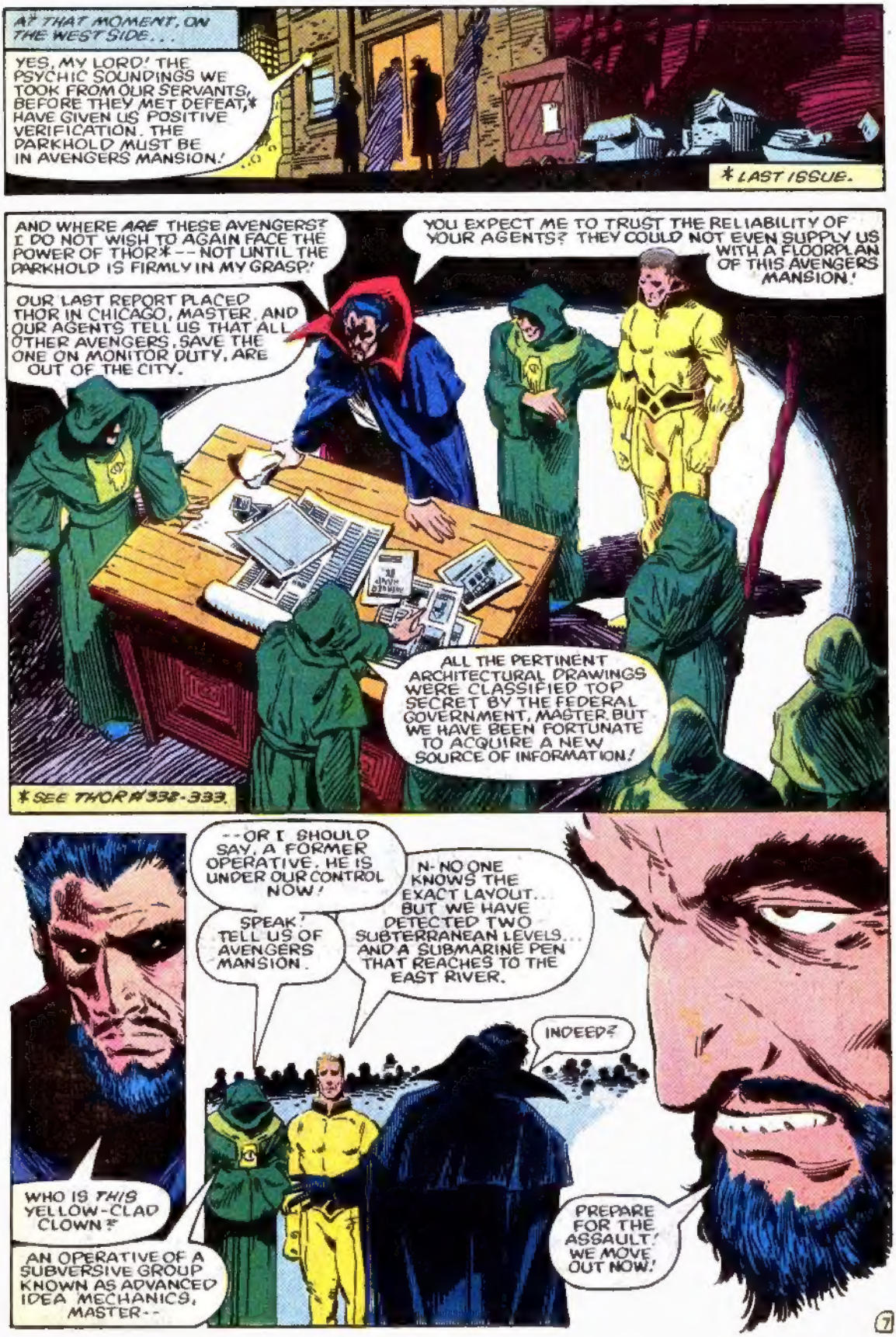
Stan Lee PRESENTS:
ASSAULT ON AVENGERS MANSION!
MEANWHILE, IN A MODEST HOUSE IN LEONIA, NEW JERSEY--
--A MOST UNUSUAL WOMAN FINDS THAT HER EVENING HAS SUDDENLY BEEN INTERRUPTED BY AN EVEN MORE UNUSUAL VISITOR.
WANDA... WANDA MAXIMOFF! I HAVE NEED THIS NIGHT OF THE SCARLET WITCH!
?!!?
DOCTOR STRANGE!

ROGER STERN WRITER • DAN GREEN PENCILER • TERRY AUSTIN INKER • JANICE CHIANG LETTERER • BOB SHAREN COLORIST • ALLEN MILGROM EDITOR • JIM SHOOTER AVENGER

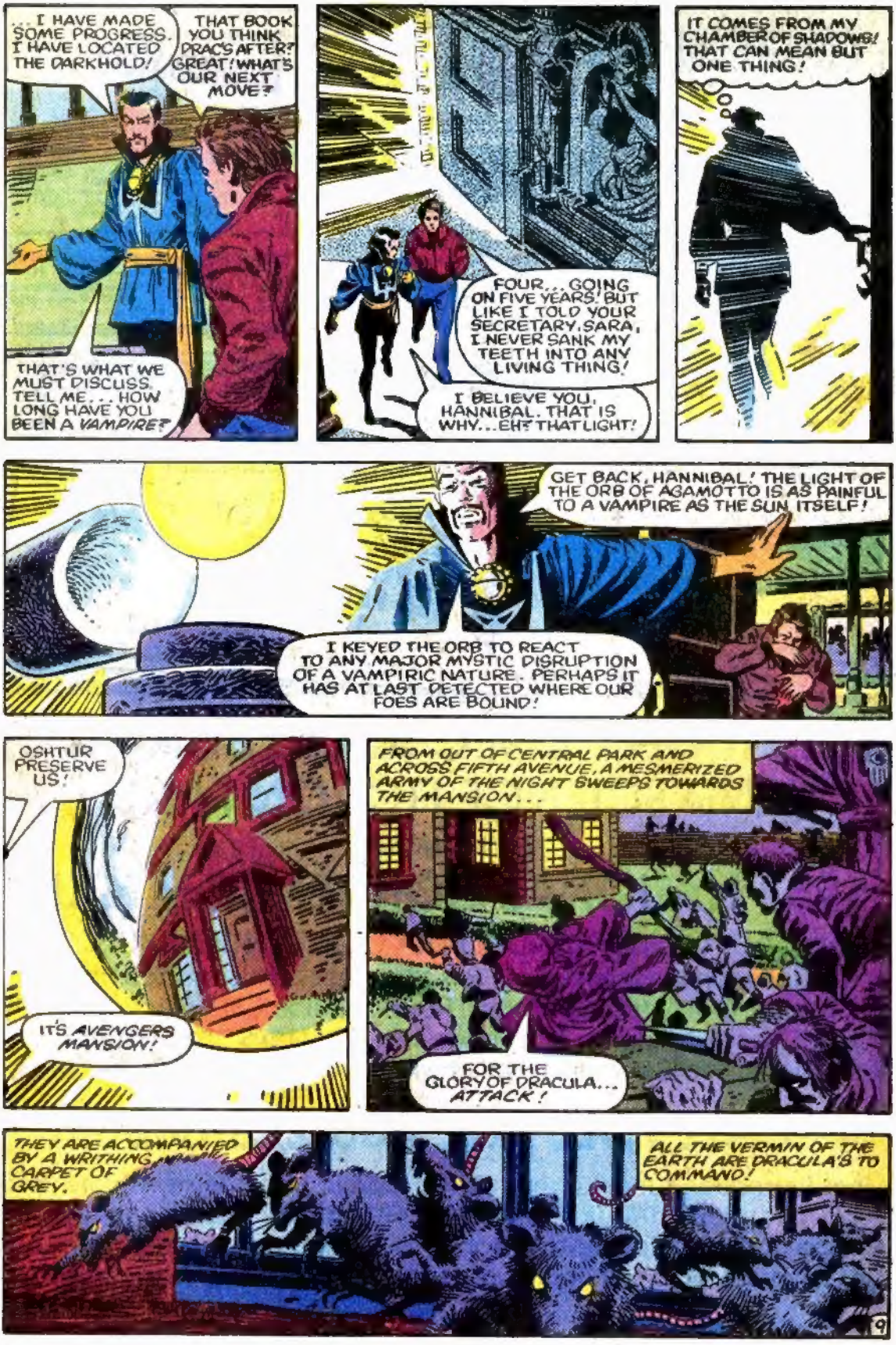
YES! I HAVE WILLED YOU TO SEE AND HEAR MY ECTOPLASMIC ASTRAL FORM!
YOU HOLD KNOWLEDGE WHICH I MUST TAP!
I DO? BUT DOCTOR--
--I'M JUST A NOVICE WHEN IT COMES TO THE MYSTIC ARTS. EVEN AS AN AVENGER, I RELIED MORE UPON MY MUTANT POWERS THAN ON ANY MAGIC I MIGHT HAVE LEARNED.
BE THAT AS IT MAY, MY CONJURATIONS HAVE LED ME HERE, TO YOU!
I SEEK A BOOK... A BOOK OF SUCH LATENT SORCEROUS POWER THAT IT HAS FRUSTRATED ALL MY ATTEMPTS TO LOCATE IT. IN DESPERATION, I WOVE A SPELL TO LOCATE THE PERSON WHO LAST POSSESSED IT.
TELL ME... WHAT DO YOU KNOW OF THE DARKHOLD?
I WISH I'D NEVER HEARD OF IT. I HAD THE BOOK LAST, THOUGH I HARDLY POSSESSED IT--
"--THINGS WERE MORE THE OTHER WAY AROUND. THROUGH THE POWER OF THAT CURSED BOOK, I WAS POSSESSED BY THE DEMON, CHTHON. I BARELY ESCAPED WITH MY SOUL."
IT TOOK THE COMBINED WILLS OF THE AVENGERS TO FREE ME. AFTERWARDS, I MADE SURE THAT THE DARKHOLD WOULD NEVER AGAIN FALL INTO UNWARY HANDS.
WHERE IS IT, WANDA? I MUST HAVE IT!
YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS!
JUST COMING IN CONTACT WITH THE DARKHOLD IS DANGEROUS--
--EVEN FOR AS MIGHTY A SORCEROR AS YOU!
4


THIS IS A RISK I MUST TAKE. I HAVE REASON TO BELIEVE THAT THE DARKHOLD IS BEING SOUGHT BY A CULT UNDER THE DOMINANCE OF THE VAMPIRE-LORD, DRACULA!
B-BUT HE'S JUST A LEGEND!
WOULD THAT HE WERE--BUT IN TRUTH, HE EXISTS. AND IF I DO NOT LAY MY HANDS UPON THE DARKHOLD, HE WILL...NO MATTER WHERE IT IS HIDDEN!
BUT HOW? IT'S LOCKED AWAY IN A SECURE VAULT IN AVENGERS MANSION! HE COULDN'T POSSIBLY--!
I HAVE LEARNED THE HARD WAY NEVER TO UNDER-ESTIMATE DRACULA! I SHALL MEET YOU AT AVENGERS MANSION WITHIN THE HOUR. PLEASE... DO NOT FAIL ME.
THE DARKHOLD MUST BE NEUTRALIZED!
NEUTRALIZED! I DIDN'T THINK THAT POSSIBLE!
IF ANYONE COULD DO THAT, I SUPPOSE DOCTOR STRANGE WOULD BE THE ONE! STILL, I HAVE AN AWFUL FEELING OF FOREBODING ABOUT IT!
890 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY... AVENGERS MANSION.
HELLO? WHY, GOOD EVENING, MISTRESS WANDA! WHY, NO...
...I HAVEN'T NOTICED ANYTHING AMISS...
THANK HEAVENS. VERY WELL, JARVIS--I'LL BE LEAVING HERE SHORTLY. DR. STEPHEN STRANGE WILL BE DROPPING BY THE MANSION LATER... AS MY GUEST.
AND I'D APPRECIATE IT IF YOU'D TELL WHOEVER IS ON MONITOR DUTY TONIGHT TO PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO OUR SECURITY NET.
5

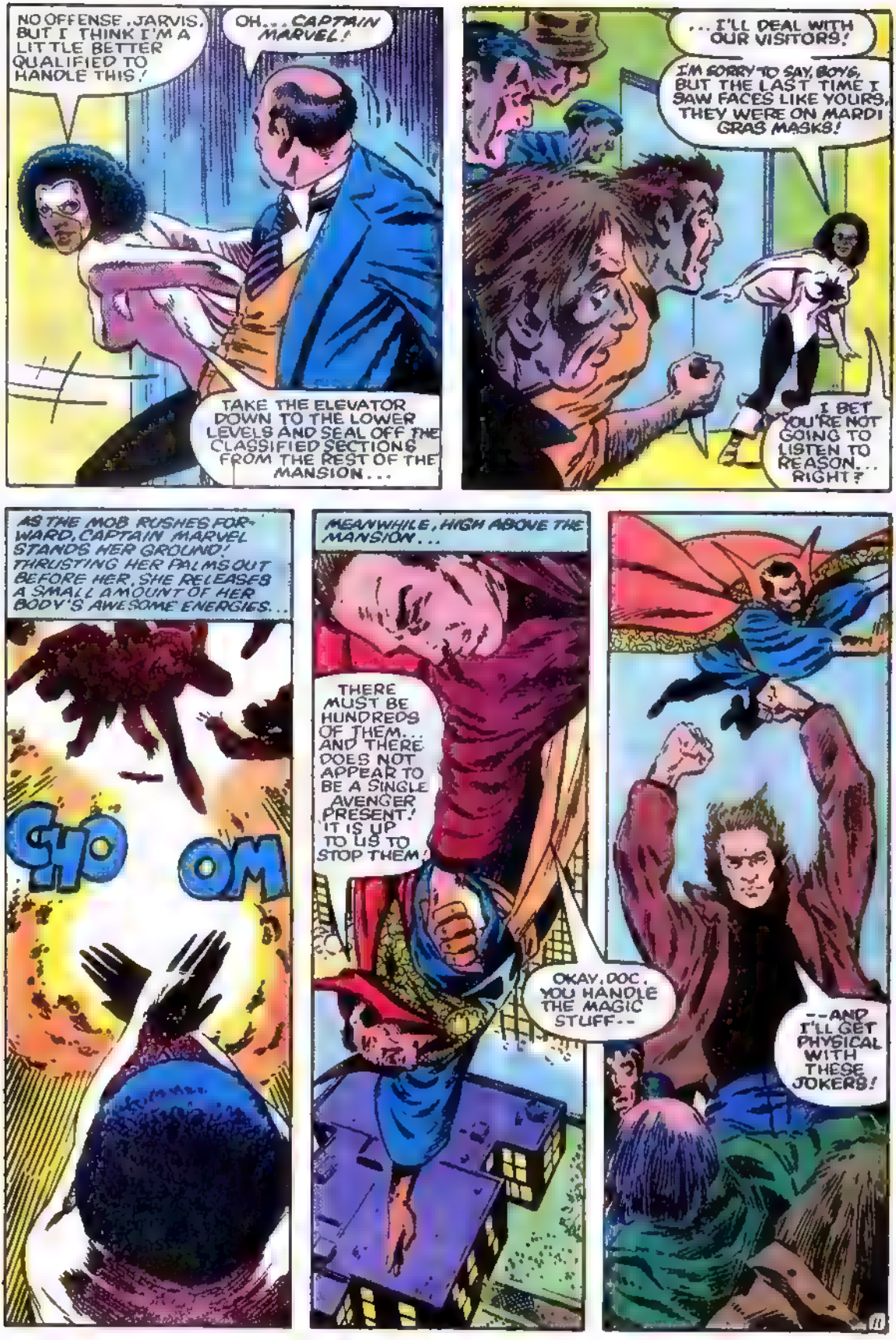

AS YOU WISH, MADAME. BUT I ASSURE YOU, THERE'S NOTHING OUT OF THE ORDINARY GOING ON AROUND HERE!
UNRESTRAINED BY THE PHYSICAL WORLD, THE SORCERER'S INVISIBLE ASTRAL BODY SLIPS THROUGH THE WALLS OF THE MANSION PANTRY--
--AND DESCENDS THROUGH LAYER AFTER LAYER OF SUPER-REINFORCED CONCRETE, UNDETECTED BY ONE OF THE MOST SOPHISTICATED SECURITY SYSTEMS KNOWN TO MAN.
IN AN INSTANT, HE PASSES INTO THE ULTRA-SECURE AVENGERS MEETING ROOM, TWO LEVELS BENEATH THE MANSION.
THIS SECTION OF THE WALL APPEARS TO BE YET ANOTHER ARRAY OF COMPUTER PANELS. BUT BY THE ALL-SEEING LIGHT OF MY AMULET--
--IT STANDS REVEALED AS A CAMOUFLAGED VAULT! INGENIOUS!
RESTRICTED CODE KNOWN
AND INSIDE--? YES!
THE DARKHOLD! AND UNDISTURBED! I HAVE FOUND IT IN TIME!
EVEN THE ANCIENT ONE--MY LATE MENTOR IN THE MYSTIC ARTS--SPOKE OF THIS LOST TOME AND ITS DEMONIC AUTHOR IN HUSHED TONES.
LET THE PAGES FLY OPEN, THAT I MIGHT FIND WHAT DRACULA SEEKS!
BY THE VISHANTI--NO! WHAT THESE WORDS REVEAL...IT IS UNSPEAKABLE!
6

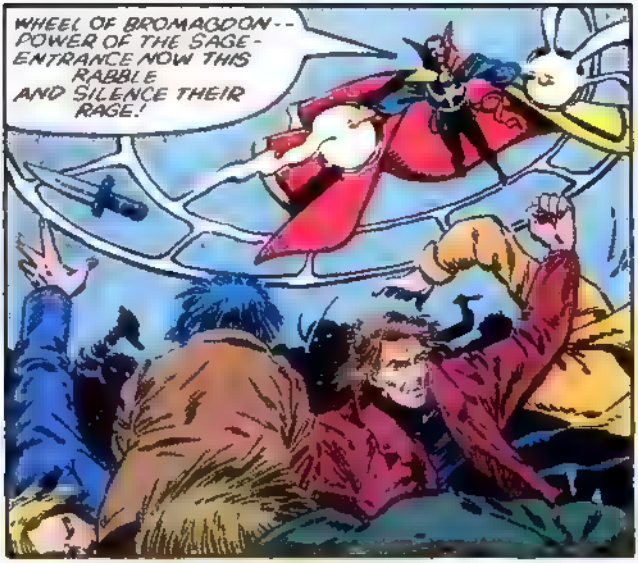

AT THAT MOMENT, ON THE WEST SIDE...
YES, MY LORD! THE PSYCHIC SOUNDINGS WE TOOK FROM OUR SERVANTS, BEFORE THEY MET DEFEAT,* HAVE GIVEN US POSITIVE VERIFICATION. THE DARKHOLD MUST BE IN AVENGERS MANSION!
* LAST ISSUE.
AND WHERE ARE THESE AVENGERS? I DO NOT WISH TO AGAIN FACE THE POWER OF THOR* -- NOT UNTIL THE DARKHOLD IS FIRMLY IN MY GRASP!
OUR LAST REPORT PLACED THOR IN CHICAGO, MASTER, AND OUR AGENTS TELL US THAT ALL OTHER AVENGERS, SAVE THE ONE ON MONITOR DUTY, ARE OUT OF THE CITY.
YOU EXPECT ME TO TRUST THE RELIABILITY OF YOUR AGENTS? THEY COULD NOT EVEN SUPPLY US WITH A FLOORPLAN OF THIS AVENGERS MANSION!
ALL THE PERTINENT ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS WERE CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET BY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, MASTER. BUT WE HAVE BEEN FORTUNATE TO ACQUIRE A NEW SOURCE OF INFORMATION!
* SEE THOR #332-333.
--OR I SHOULD SAY, A FORMER OPERATIVE. HE IS UNDER OUR CONTROL NOW!
SPEAK! TELL US OF AVENGERS MANSION.
N-NO ONE KNOWS THE EXACT LAYOUT... BUT WE HAVE DETECTED TWO SUBTERRANEAN LEVELS... AND A SUBMARINE PEN THAT REACHES TO THE EAST RIVER.
INDEED?
WHO IS THIS YELLOW-CLAD CLOWN?
AN OPERATIVE OF A SUBVERSIVE GROUP KNOWN AS ADVANCED IDEA MECHANICS, MASTER--
PREPARE FOR THE ASSAULT! WE MOVE OUT NOW!

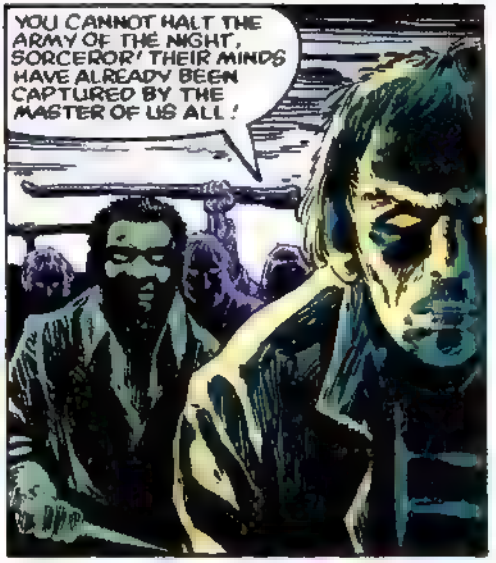
MOMENTS LATER, AS DOCTOR STRANGE RETURNS TO HIS GREENWICH VILLAGE SANCTUM...
I HAVE ARRIVED NONE TOO SOON.
I MUST REJOIN MY PHYSICAL BODY--
--WITHIN.
PLEASE, SARA--A LITTLE TEA WILL HELP YOU RELAX.
RELAX? THAT'S EASY FOR YOU TO SAY! YOU'VE WORKED FOR DOC A LOT LONGER THAN I HAVE! HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO RELAX--
--WHEN DOC'S DOING HIS OUT-OF-THE-BODY NUMBER TO FIND SOME BOOK BEFORE DRACULA--DRACULA, MIND YOU--DOES.
AND HERE I THOUGHT I WAS GETTING USED TO ALL THIS WEIRDNESS!
"WEIRD" IT MAY BE, SARA. BUT WORRY WILL NOT IMPROVE THINGS.
OH! YOU'RE... BACK.
YES. WONG WILL YOU SEE TO THE DOOR?
THE DOOR? BUT NOBODY'S KNOCKED!
NOR IS THERE ANY NEED FOR ANYONE TO KNOCK... NOW.
GOOD EVENING, MR. KING.
MY ASTRAL SELF SPOTTED HIM OUTSIDE.
HOW DID YOU KNOW--?
ANY MORE WORD ON ON THE DARKHOLDER CULT, HANNIBAL?
NOTHING NEW, DOC. WHAT'S MORE, MY CONTACTS WHO THOUGHT THEY'D SEEN THE CULTISTS IN THE CITY HAVE DISAPPEARED... AND THEY'RE NOT THE ONLY ONES!
THE STREETS ARE QUIET TONIGHT... MAYBE A LITTLE TOO QUIET. IT'S LIKE EVERY BUM AND LOWLIFE SUDDENLY VANISHED.
MAYBE I'VE BEEN A DETECTIVE TOO LONG, BUT SOMETHING OUT THERE DOESN'T SMELL RIGHT TO ME.
I AGREE, HANNIBAL. SOMETHING IS AFOOT. STILL...
8

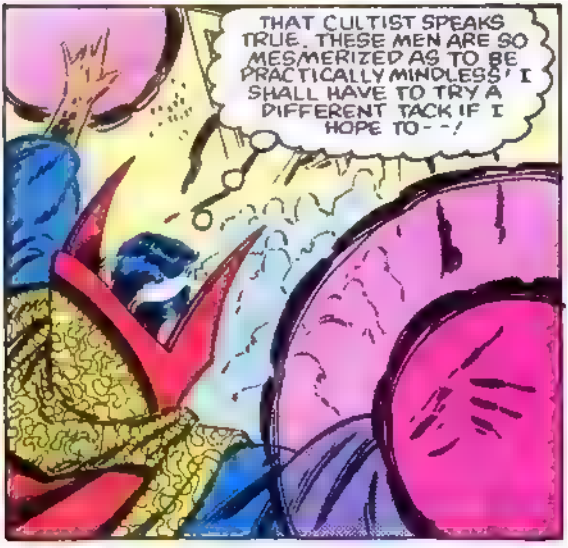

...I HAVE MADE SOME PROGRESS. I HAVE LOCATED THE DARKHOLD!
THAT BOOK YOU THINK DRAC'S AFTER? GREAT! WHAT'S OUR NEXT MOVE?
THAT'S WHAT WE MUST DISCUSS. TELL ME... HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN A VAMPIRE?
FOUR... GOING ON FIVE YEARS. BUT LIKE I TOLD YOUR SECRETARY, SARA, I NEVER SANK MY TEETH INTO ANY LIVING THING!
I BELIEVE YOU, HANNIBAL. THAT IS WHY... EH? THAT LIGHT!
IT COMES FROM MY CHAMBER OF SHADOWS! THAT CAN MEAN BUT ONE THING!
GET BACK, HANNIBAL! THE LIGHT OF THE ORB OF AGAMOTTO IS AS PAINFUL TO A VAMPIRE AS THE SUN ITSELF!
I KEYED THE ORB TO REACT TO ANY MAJOR MYSTIC DISRUPTION OF A VAMPIRIC NATURE. PERHAPS IT HAS AT LAST DETECTED WHERE OUR FOES ARE BOUND!
OSHTUR PRESERVE US!
IT'S AVENGERS MANSION!
FROM OUT OF CENTRAL PARK AND ACROSS FIFTH AVENUE, A MESMERIZED ARMY OF THE NIGHT SWEEPS TOWARDS THE MANSION...
FOR THE GLORY OF DRACULA... ATTACK!
THEY ARE ACCOMPANIED BY A WRITHING, CARPET OF GREY.
ALL THE VERMIN OF THE EARTH ARE DRACULA'S TO COMMAND!
9

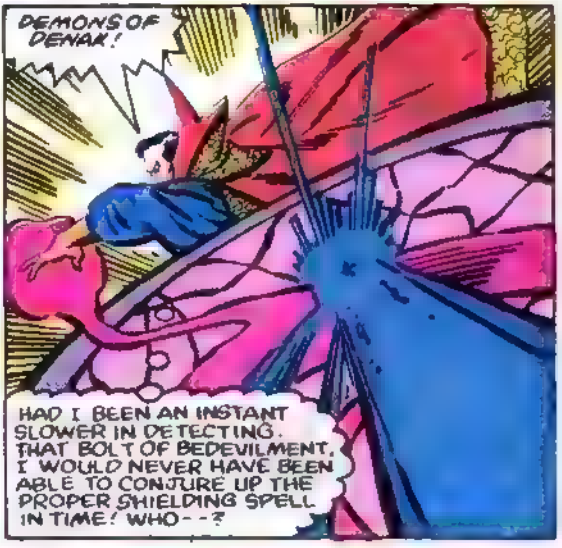
AS THE ENTRANCED MOB BATTERS AT THE DOOR, STEEL DETENTION COILS ENSNARE THE FIRST ARRIVALS--
--AND THOSE WHO FOLLOW FIND THEMSELVES TRAPPED IN A TITANIUM-WEB NET.
BUT STILL, THE LIVING TIDE RUSHES ON!
STRIKE! STRIKE FOR DRACULA!
KRASH!
SMASHING THEIR WAY INTO THE FOYER, THE FIRST WAVE IS RENDERED UNCONSCIOUS BY AUTOMATICALLY ACTIVATED STUNULATOR BEAMS.
BUT THAT LINE OF DEFENSE SOON FALLS TO TOOTH AND CLAW--
--AND THE ARMY OF THE NIGHT SURGES AHEAD!
THAT AVENGERS MANSION MIGHT FALL TO RABBLE SUCH AS THIS... IT IS UNTHINKABLE!
WELL, THEY SHALL NOT PASS EDWIN JARVIS WITHOUT A FIGHT!


NO OFFENSE, JARVIS, BUT I THINK I'M A LITTLE BETTER QUALIFIED TO HANDLE THIS!
OH... CAPTAIN MARVEL!
TAKE THE ELEVATOR DOWN TO THE LOWER LEVELS AND SEAL OFF THE CLASSIFIED SECTIONS FROM THE REST OF THE MANSION...
...I'LL DEAL WITH OUR VISITORS!
I'M SORRY TO SAY, BOYS, BUT THE LAST TIME I SAW FACES LIKE YOURS, THEY WERE ON MARDI GRAS MASKS!
I BET YOU'RE NOT GOING TO LISTEN TO REASON... RIGHT?
AS THE MOB RUSHES FORWARD, CAPTAIN MARVEL STANDS HER GROUND! THRUSTING HER PALMS OUT BEFORE HER, SHE RELEASES A SMALL AMOUNT OF HER BODY'S AWESOME ENERGIES...
GHOOM
MEANWHILE, HIGH ABOVE THE MANSION...
THERE MUST BE HUNDREDS OF THEM... AND THERE DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE A SINGLE AVENGER PRESENT! IT IS UP TO US TO STOP THEM!
OKAY, DOC, YOU HANDLE THE MAGIC STUFF--
--AND I'LL GET PHYSICAL WITH THESE JOKERS!

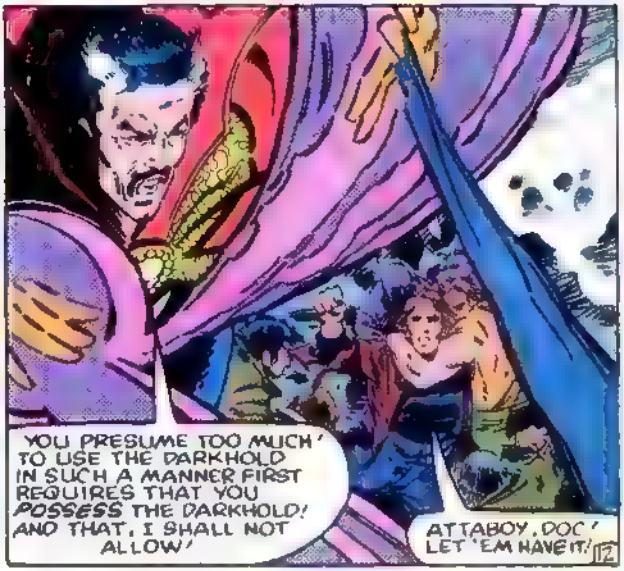

WHEEL OF BROMAGDON--
POWER OF THE SAGE-
ENTRANCE NOW THIS
RABBLE
AND SILENCE THEIR
RAGE!


YOU CANNOT HALT THE
ARMY OF THE NIGHT,
SORCEROR! THEIR MINDS
HAVE ALREADY BEEN
CAPTURED BY THE
MASTER OF US ALL!

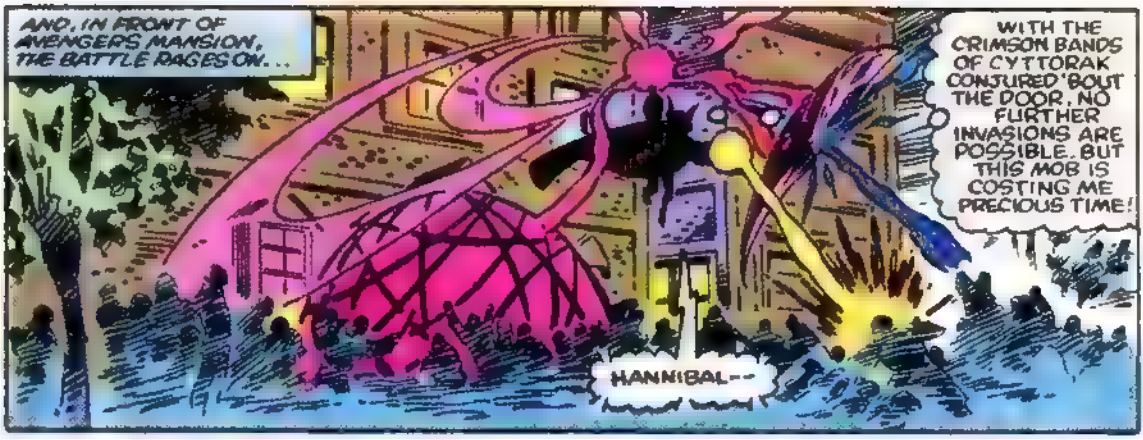

THAT CULTIST SPEAKS
TRUE. THESE MEN ARE SO
MESMERIZED AS TO BE
PRACTICALLY MINDLESS! I
SHALL HAVE TO TRY A
DIFFERENT TACK IF I
HOPE TO--!


DEMONS OF
DENAK!
HAD I BEEN AN INSTANT
SLOWER IN DETECTING
THAT BOLT OF BEDEVILMENT,
I WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN
ABLE TO CONJURE UP THE
PROPER SHIELDING SPELL
IN TIME! WHO--?

OUR STAFFS ARE FOR MORE
THAN MERE CEREMONY, DOCTOR!
THEY SERVE AS A FOCUS FOR
OUR EVER-GROWING MIGHT!
AND BEFORE THIS NIGHT
IS OVER, THEY SHALL BE
TAPPING THE FULL POWER
OF THE DARKHOLD ITSELF!


YOU PRESUME TOO MUCH!
TO USE THE DARKHOLD
IN SUCH A MANNER FIRST
REQUIRES THAT YOU
POSSESS THE DARKHOLD!
AND THAT, I SHALL NOT
ALLOW!
ATTABOY, DOC!
LET 'EM HAVE IT!

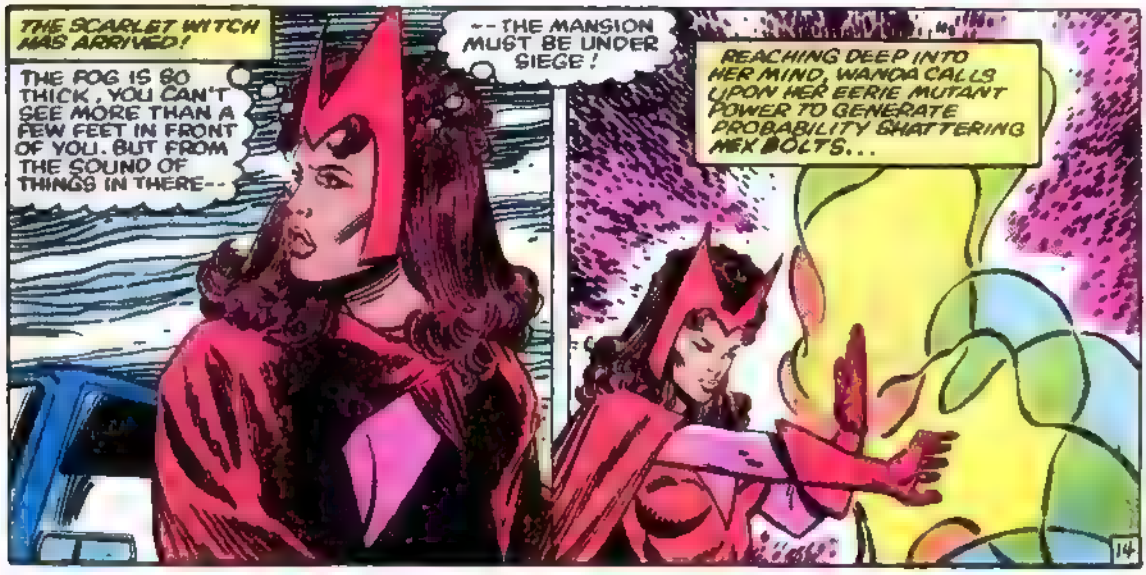
LET THE ALL-SEEING POWER O'ERCOME THE OBSCENE, IN THIS DESPERATE HOUR WITH THE FLAMES OF FALTINE!
WHA--?
AS WITH MOST CULTS, THEIR POWER IS DERIVED MAINLY FROM THEIR NUMBERS...
JUST OVER A MILE AWAY, A DARK FORM CLIMBS HIGH INTO THE AIR ABOVE THE EAST RIVER--
.. THEIR POWER DWINDLES AS EACH ONE FALLS. BUT WHERE IS THE ARCHITECT OF THIS MADNESS? WHERE IS DRACULA?
- AND THEN PLUNGES INTO THE FETID WATERS.
BENEATH THE WAVES, THE VAMPIRE-LORD AGAIN ASSUMES HIS TRUE FORM
SWIFT, POWERFUL STROKES CARRY HIM TO THE RIVER BOTTOM... AND THE GREAT SEA DOOR WHICH HE SEEKS
LONG, TALON-LIKE FINGERS CLAW AT THE JUNCTURE OF THE HUGE STEEL DOORS.
AND THEN, WITH A STRENGTH GREATER THAN THAT OF TWENTY MORTAL MEN--
- DRACULA FORCES THEM OPEN! ACCESS TO THE LITTLE-KNOWN UNDERGROUND TUNNEL IS HIS!

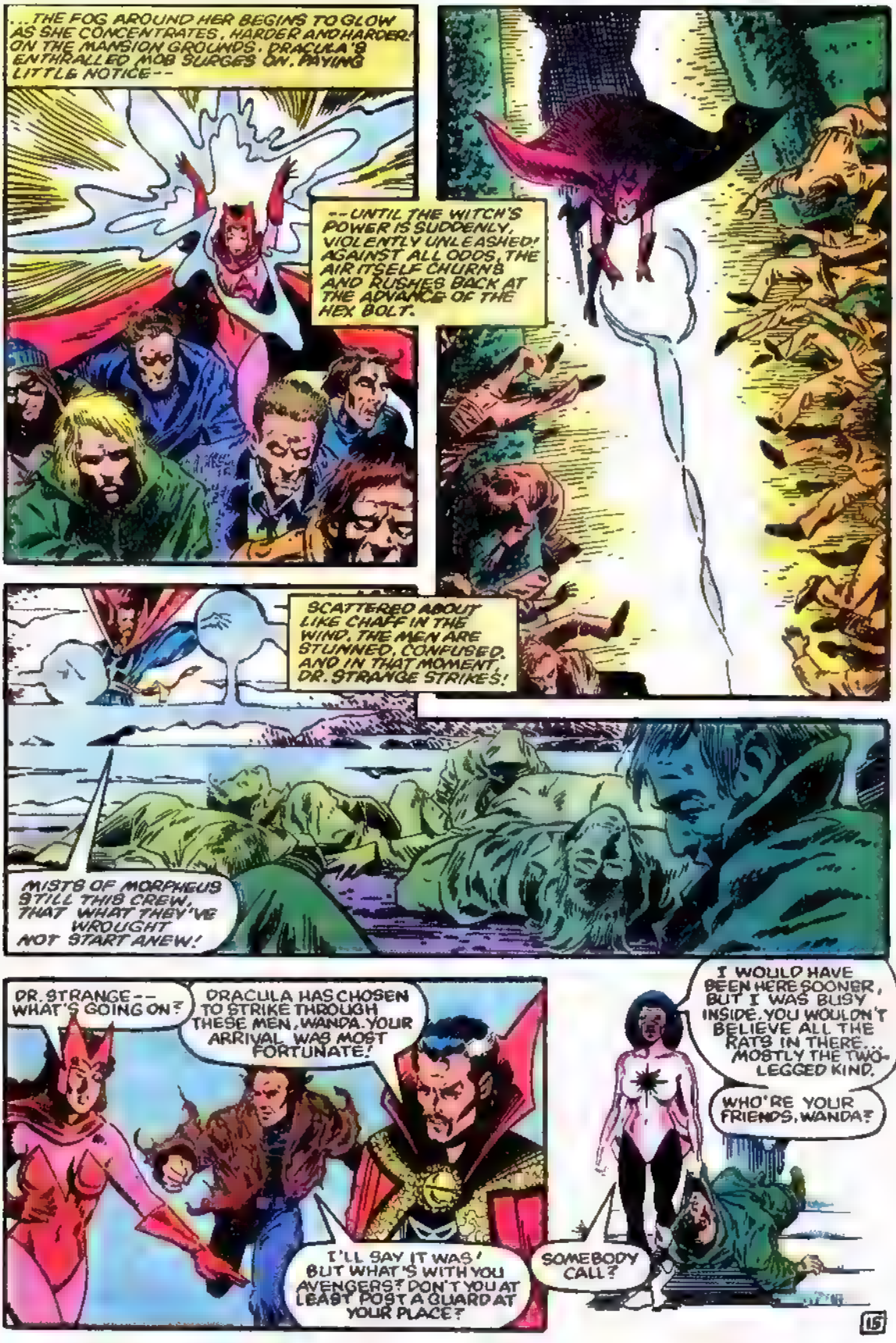

AND, IN FRONT OF AVENGERS MANSION, THE BATTLE RAGES ON...
WITH THE CRIMSON BANDS OF CYTTORAK CONJURED 'BOUT THE DOOR, NO FURTHER INVASIONS ARE POSSIBLE. BUT THIS MOB IS COSTING ME PRECIOUS TIME!
HANNIBAL--

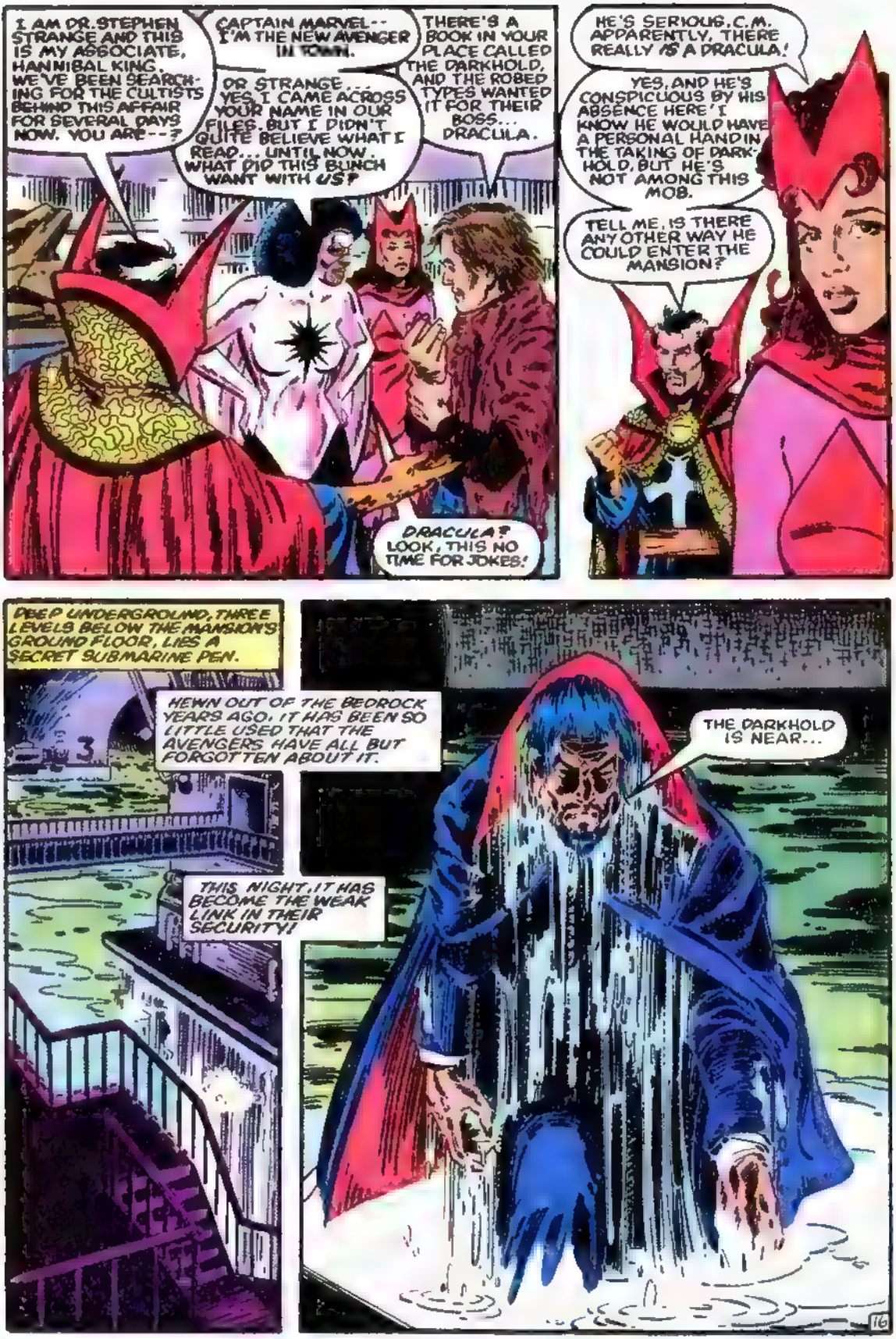
--I NEED A DIVERSION!
WHAT THE--? THAT'S DOC'S VOICE...IN MY HEAD!
GUESS I SHOULD'VE KNOWN THAT TELEPATHY WOULD BE IN HIS BAG OF TRICKS!
I HEAR YA, DOC, AND I'M DOING THE BEST I CAN--

--BUT IT SEEMS THAT FOR EVERY TEN OF THESE BUMS I FLATTEN, TWENTY MORE SHOW UP AS REPLACEMENTS!
I COULD USE A DIVERSION MYSELF! WHERE ARE THESE AVENGER GUYS WHEN YOU REALLY NEED 'EM?

AS IF IN ANSWER, A LATE-MODEL CAR SUDDENLY EXECUTES A SHARP U-TURN IN THE MIDDLE OF A FOG-ENSHROUDED FIFTH AVENUE AND SCREECHES TO A HALT OUTSIDE THE MANSION GATES


THE SCARLET WITCH HAS ARRIVED!
THE FOG IS SO THICK, YOU CAN'T SEE MORE THAN A FEW FEET IN FRONT OF YOU. BUT FROM THE SOUND OF THINGS IN THERE--
--THE MANSION MUST BE UNDER SIEGE!
REACHING DEEP INTO HER MIND, WANDA CALLS UPON HER EERIE MUTANT POWER TO GENERATE PROBABILITY SHATTERING HEX BOLTS...


...THE FOG AROUND HER BEGINS TO GLOW AS SHE CONCENTRATES, HARDER AND HARDER! ON THE MANSION GROUNDS, DRACULA'S ENTHRALLED MOB SURGES ON, PAYING LITTLE NOTICE--
--UNTIL THE WITCH'S POWER IS SUDDENLY, VIOLENTLY UNLEASHED! AGAINST ALL ODDS, THE AIR ITSELF CHURNS AND RUSHES BACK AT THE ADVANCE OF THE HEX BOLT.
SCATTERED ABOUT LIKE CHAFF IN THE WIND, THE MEN ARE STUNNED, CONFUSED, AND IN THAT MOMENT, DR. STRANGE STRIKES!
MISTS OF MORPHEUS STILL THIS CREW, THAT WHAT THEY'VE WROUGHT NOT START ANEW!
DR. STRANGE -- WHAT'S GOING ON?
DRACULA HAS CHOSEN TO STRIKE THROUGH THESE MEN, WANDA. YOUR ARRIVAL WAS MOST FORTUNATE!
I'LL SAY IT WAS! BUT WHAT'S WITH YOU AVENGERS? DON'T YOU AT LEAST POST A GUARD AT YOUR PLACE?
SOMEBODY CALL?
I WOULD HAVE BEEN HERE SOONER, BUT I WAS BUSY INSIDE. YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE ALL THE RATS IN THERE... MOSTLY THE TWO-LEGGED KIND.
WHO'RE YOUR FRIENDS, WANDA?


I AM DR. STEPHEN STRANGE AND THIS IS MY ASSOCIATE, HANNIBAL KING. WE'VE BEEN SEARCHING FOR THE CULTISTS BEHIND THIS AFFAIR FOR SEVERAL DAYS NOW. YOU ARE--?
CAPTAIN MARVEL-- I'M THE NEW AVENGER IN TOWN.
DR. STRANGE... YES, I CAME ACROSS YOUR NAME IN OUR FILES. BUT I DIDN'T QUITE BELIEVE WHAT I READ... UNTIL NOW. WHAT DID THIS BUNCH WANT WITH US?
THERE'S A BOOK IN YOUR PLACE CALLED THE DARKHOLD, AND THE ROBED TYPES WANTED IT FOR THEIR BOSS... DRACULA.
DRACULA? LOOK, THIS NO TIME FOR JOKES!
HE'S SERIOUS, C.M. APPARENTLY, THERE REALLY IS A DRACULA!
YES, AND HE'S CONSPICUOUS BY HIS ABSENCE HERE! I KNOW HE WOULD HAVE A PERSONAL HAND IN THE TAKING OF DARKHOLD, BUT HE'S NOT AMONG THIS MOB.
TELL ME, IS THERE ANY OTHER WAY HE COULD ENTER THE MANSION?
DEEP UNDERGROUND, THREE LEVELS BELOW THE MANSION'S GROUND FLOOR, LIES A SECRET SUBMARINE PEN.
HEWN OUT OF THE BEDROCK YEARS AGO, IT HAS BEEN SO LITTLE USED THAT THE AVENGERS HAVE ALL BUT FORGOTTEN ABOUT IT.
THIS NIGHT, IT HAS BECOME THE WEAK LINK IN THEIR SECURITY!
THE DARKHOLD IS NEAR...
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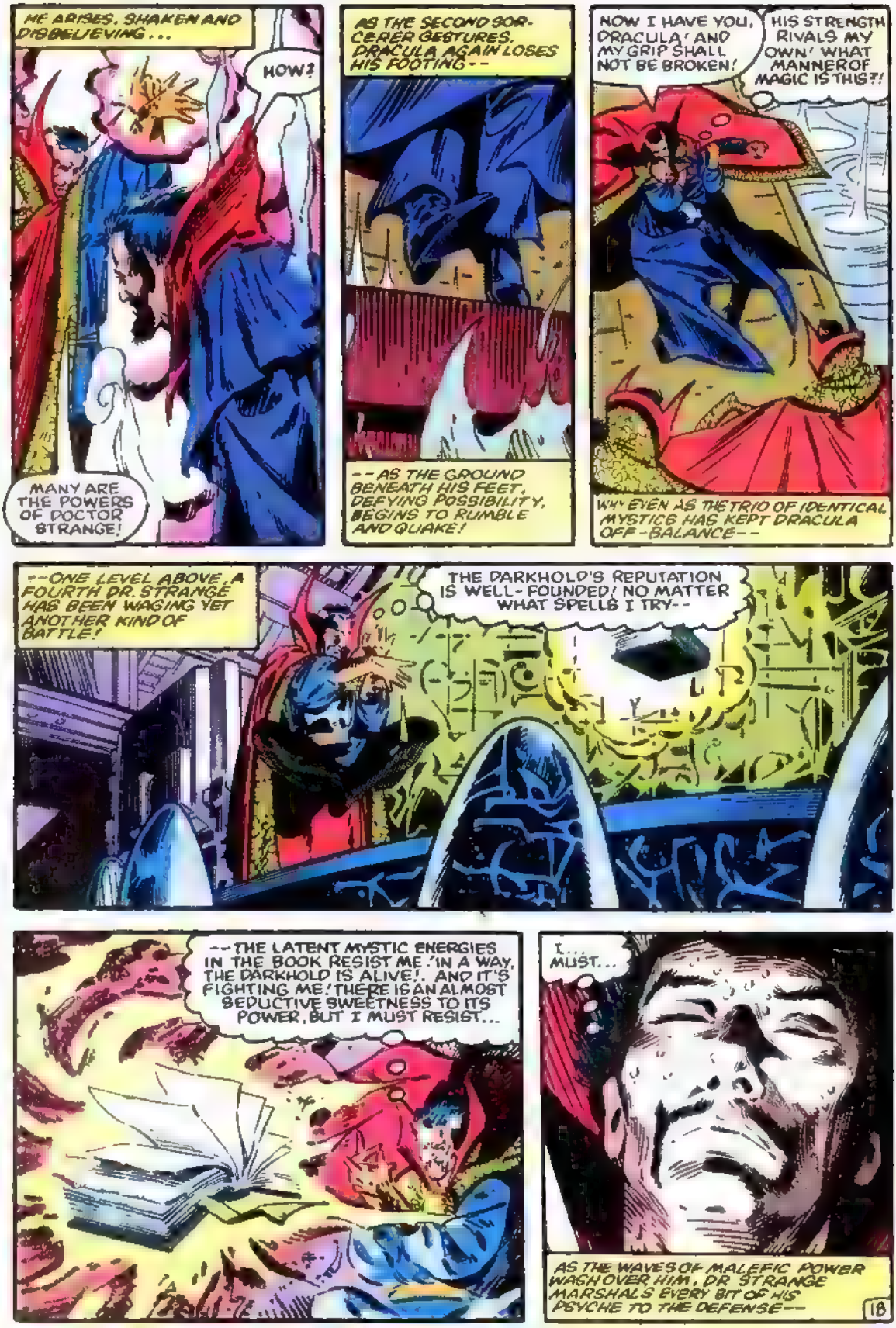
... I CAN FEEL ITS POWER CALLING OUT TO ME!
THEN IT CALLS OUT IN VAIN, MONSTER!
WELL... DOCTOR STRANGE, I SUPPOSE YOU FLATTER YOURSELF BY THINKING YOU CAN STOP ME?
I NOT ONLY THINK...
... BUT I KNOW! YOU SHALL NOT POSSESS THE DARKHOLD WHILE I YET LIVE!
WHAT?! ANOTHER ONE?
AND YET ANOTHER, VAMPIRE! IF I MUST RE-CREATE MYSELF A HUNDRED TIMES OVER TO STOP YOU, I SHALL NOT HESITATE TO DO SO!
YOU HAVE NO SUCH POWER! THIS IS BUT ONE OF YOUR SORCEROUS ILLUSIONS! AND SUCH PUNY MAGICKS WILL NOT KEEP ME FROM MY GOALS!
OH?
THEN WHAT OF *THIS* FORM OF... MAGICK?!
CAUGHT IN THE BLAST OF CONCUSSIVE FORCE, THE VAMPIRE-LORD IS BLOWN OFF HIS FEET!
17


HE ARISES, SHAKEN AND DISBELIEVING...
HOW?
MANY ARE THE POWERS OF DOCTOR STRANGE!
AS THE SECOND SORCERER GESTURES, DRACULA AGAIN LOSES HIS FOOTING--
--AS THE GROUND BENEATH HIS FEET, DEFYING POSSIBILITY, BEGINS TO RUMBLE AND QUAKE!
NOW I HAVE YOU, DRACULA! AND MY GRIP SHALL NOT BE BROKEN!
HIS STRENGTH RIVALS MY OWN! WHAT MANNER OF MAGIC IS THIS?!
WHY EVEN AS THE TRIO OF IDENTICAL MYSTICS HAS KEPT DRACULA OFF-BALANCE--
--ONE LEVEL ABOVE, A FOURTH DR. STRANGE HAS BEEN WAGING YET ANOTHER KIND OF BATTLE!
THE DARKHOLD'S REPUTATION IS WELL-FOUNDED! NO MATTER WHAT SPELLS I TRY--
--THE LATENT MYSTIC ENERGIES IN THE BOOK RESIST ME! IN A WAY, THE DARKHOLD IS ALIVE! AND IT'S FIGHTING ME! THERE IS AN ALMOST SEDUCTIVE SWEETNESS TO ITS POWER, BUT I MUST RESIST...
I... MUST...
AS THE WAVES OF MALEFIC POWER WASH OVER HIM, DR STRANGE MARSHALS EVERY BIT OF HIS PSYCHE TO THE DEFENSE--
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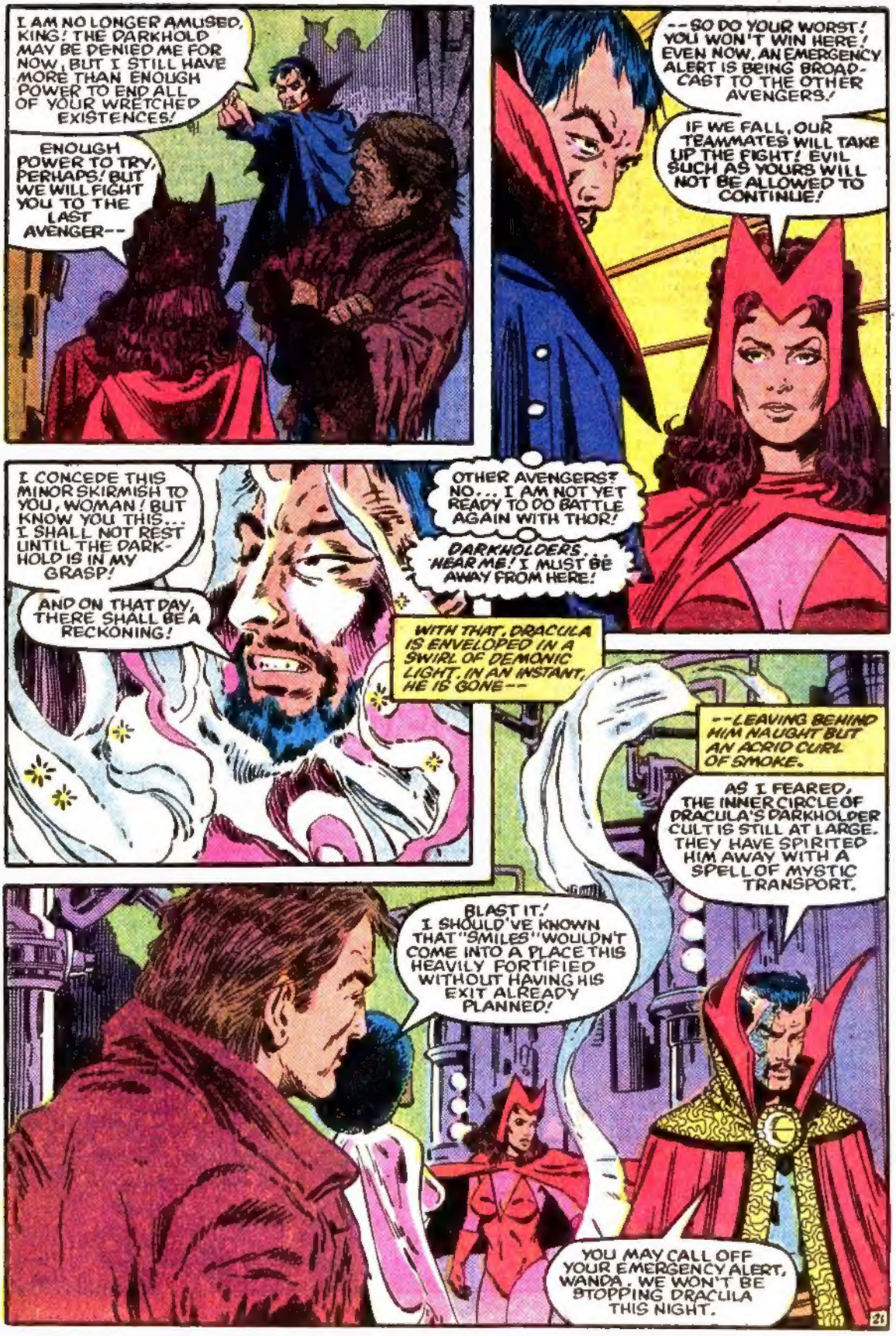
--AS HE DOES, HIS CAREFULLY CONJURED ILLUSIONS OF SIGHT AND SOUND BEGIN TO FADE.
GIVE IT UP, "SMILES"! YOU'RE NOT GETTING OUT OF THIS ONE!
EH? THAT IS NOT THE VOICE OF DR. STRANGE! THAT IS THE VOICE OF--
--HANNIBAL KING! HA-HA-HA! A VERY CLEVER MANEUVER, KING! YOU AND YOUR COMPANIONS ACTUALLY HAD ME FOOLED FOR A MOMENT!
IT IS NOT OFTEN THAT DRACULA IS SO DECEIVED! I SHALL SEE TO IT THAT YOU ALL COME TO REGRET THIS... IN A VERY PAINFUL MANNER!
YES, KING, BY ALL MEANS, TIGHTEN YOUR GRIP! NOW THAT I KNOW WHAT I AM UP AGAINST, IT WILL BE ALL THE MORE SATISFYING TO... TO...
BY CHTHON! SOMETHING IS HAPPENING TO THE DARKHOLD! I FEEL ITS POWER LESSENING... SEEPING AWAY!
NO!
WITH A SINGLE, SWIFT TURN, DRACULA RIPS FREE FROM KING'S HOLD--
--AND SENDS HIM FLYING DIRECTLY INTO THE PATH OF THE STARTLED AVENGERS!
THREE, FOUR STEPS AT A TIME, HE RACES UP THE STAIRS TO THE LEVEL ABOVE.
NOTHING, NOT EVEN THE DOUBLE-THICK SECURITY DOORS CAN STOP HIM!
NO!!
STILL, HE IS TOO LATE!

THE OBJECT OF HIS DESIRE IS...
GONE!
YOU HAVE DONE THIS, STRANGE! REVERSE YOUR SPELL! RETURN THE DARKHOLD!
THAT... CANNOT... BE DONE...
I SAY THAT IT CAN! LOOK AT ME, SORCERER! LOOK AT ME!
DON'T BOTHER TRYING TO HYPNOTIZE ME AGAIN, DRACULA. I AM PREPARED THIS TIME... I CAN RESIST YOU...
YOUR MIND MAY BE STRONG, WIZARD, BUT YOUR BODY IS WEAK! YOU ARE PHYSICALLY DRAINED FROM YOUR ENCOUNTER WITH THE DARKHOLD!
YOU WILL TELL ME WHAT YOU'VE DONE WITH THAT TOME, IF I MUST RIP THAT KNOWLEDGE FROM YOUR BODY... PIECE BY PIECE!
BUT BEFORE DRACULA CAN REACH THE MYSTIC MASTER...
ARRGH! THAT CURSED LIGHT! IT BURNS LIKE THE SUN ITSELF!
THAT'S RIGHT! I WENT A LITTLE HEAVY ON THE ULTRAVIOLET RAYS... JUST WITH YOU IN MIND!
AND I CAN CHANGE INTO OTHER KINDS OF ENERGY THAT CAN BE EVEN NASTIER! SO DON'T TRY ANYTHING CUTE! THIS MAN IS UNDER AVENGERS PROTECTION!
BETTER LISTEN TO THE LADY, "SMILES"! I THINK SHE'S GOT YOU BY THE SHORT HAIRS!
BESIDES, YOU'RE SURROUNDED!
20


I AM NO LONGER AMUSED, KING! THE DARKHOLD MAY BE DENIED ME FOR NOW, BUT I STILL HAVE MORE THAN ENOUGH POWER TO END ALL OF YOUR WRETCHED EXISTENCES!
ENOUGH POWER TO TRY, PERHAPS! BUT WE WILL FIGHT YOU TO THE LAST AVENGER--
--SO DO YOUR WORST! YOU WON'T WIN HERE! EVEN NOW, AN EMERGENCY ALERT IS BEING BROADCAST TO THE OTHER AVENGERS!
IF WE FALL, OUR TEAMMATES WILL TAKE UP THE FIGHT! EVIL SUCH AS YOURS WILL NOT BE ALLOWED TO CONTINUE!
I CONCEDE THIS MINOR SKIRMISH TO YOU, WOMAN! BUT KNOW YOU THIS... I SHALL NOT REST UNTIL THE DARKHOLD IS IN MY GRASP!
AND ON THAT DAY, THERE SHALL BE A RECKONING!
OTHER AVENGERS? NO... I AM NOT YET READY TO DO BATTLE AGAIN WITH THOR!
DARKHOLDERS, NEAR ME! I MUST BE AWAY FROM HERE!
WITH THAT, DRACULA IS ENVELOPED IN A SWIRL OF DEMONIC LIGHT. IN AN INSTANT, HE IS GONE--
--LEAVING BEHIND HIM NAUGHT BUT AN ACRID CURL OF SMOKE.
AS I FEARED, THE INNER CIRCLE OF DRACULA'S DARKHOLDER CULT IS STILL AT LARGE. THEY HAVE SPIRITED HIM AWAY WITH A SPELL OF MYSTIC TRANSPORT.
BLAST IT! I SHOULD'VE KNOWN THAT "SMILES" WOULDN'T COME INTO A PLACE THIS HEAVILY FORTIFIED WITHOUT HAVING HIS EXIT ALREADY PLANNED!
YOU MAY CALL OFF YOUR EMERGENCY ALERT, WANDA. WE WON'T BE STOPPING DRACULA THIS NIGHT.
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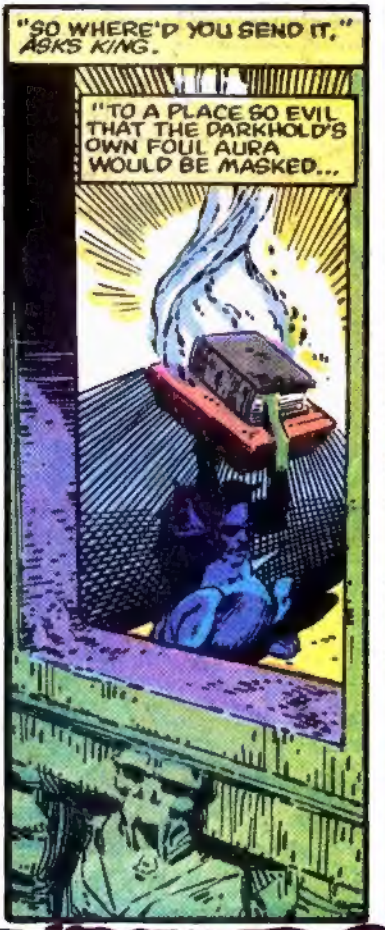
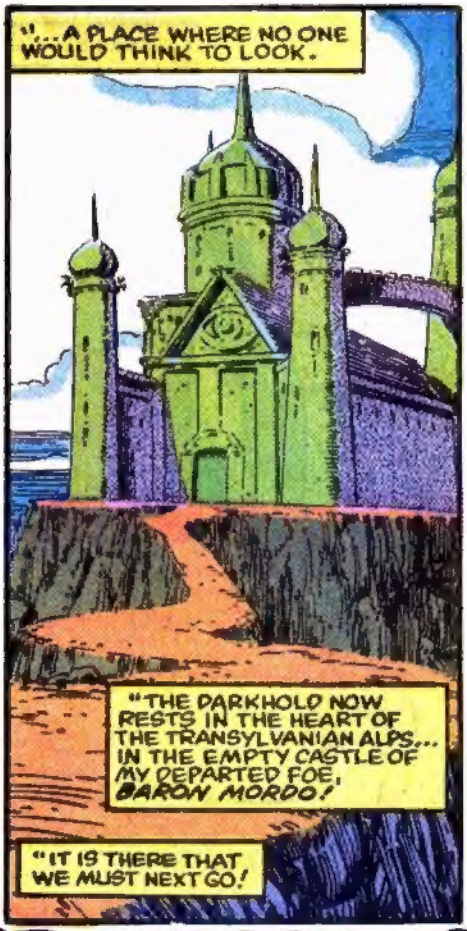
SOME TIME LATER, AS THE POLICE ARRIVE TO HAUL AWAY THE SLEEPING REMNANTS OF DRACULA'S ARMY, KING AND STRANGE QUIETLY LEAVE BY A SIDE DOOR.
AREN'T YOU GONNA BE A LITTLE CONSPICUOUS ON THE STREETS IN THAT GET-UP, DOC?
NOT TO WORRY, HANNIBAL. A SIMPLE SPELL WILL HIDE MY TRUE ATTIRE FROM CURIOUS EYES.

THAT'S A HANDY TRICK, YOU MUST SAVE A LOT ON CLOTHING BILLS.
THERE'S ONE THING THAT PUZZLES ME. JUST BEFORE HE BLINKED OUT, DRACULA TALKED LIKE HE WAS STILL GOING TO GET HIS HANDS ON THE DARKHOLD. HOW CAN HE DO THAT IF YOU DESTROYED IT?
I DIDN'T... I COULDN'T. THE BOOK WAS TOO STRONG TO NEUTRALIZE IN SO SHORT A TIME.

"THE BEST I COULD DO WAS SEND IT ELSEWHERE. THE DARKHOLDERS, AFTER ALL, ARE NOT THE ONLY ONES WHO CAN WEAVE SPELLS OF TRANSPORT!




"...A PLACE WHERE NO ONE WOULD THINK TO LOOK.
"THE DARKHOLD NOW RESTS IN THE HEART OF THE TRANSYLVANIAN ALPS... IN THE EMPTY CASTLE OF MY DEPARTED FOE, BARON MORDO!
"IT IS THERE THAT WE MUST NEXT GO!

NEXT ISSUE: THE ORIGIN OF VAMPIRISM IS REVEALED IN...

"POWER BE THE PRIZE!"